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Nurturing your Relationship

There is nothing in our personal training, culture and education to prepare us for the demands of marriage and parenting. In our formal education, we are not taught the relational and emotional coping skills necessary to nurture our adult relationships. Beyond needing to learn about communication and active listening skills, we go into marriage with little knowledge about resolving interpersonal conflict or negotiating our needs, wants and desires with a loved partner. Although some individuals have been raised in nurturing homes, resolution of conflict by your parents often occurred behind closed doors, and few of us have been given adaptive models for the negotiation of interpersonal needs within the context of marriage.

Noted psychologist John Gottman, Ph. D. has written extensively about the skills and behaviors needed for a successful, loving and fulfilling relationship (*The Seven Principles of Successful Marriage*). There are multiple types of positive behaviors that deepen the levels of trust and intimacy. In contrast, there are various types of negative behaviors that are toxic to relationships and erode trust and emotional connection. While all couples have a mix of both positive and negative behaviors, Dr. Gottman notes that successful couples typically demonstrate five times as many positive behaviors as negative behaviors. This 5 to 1 ratio appears to be the single best predictor of a loving, growing, long-term relationship.

Positive Behaviors

Many people have compared marriage to the planting and nurturing of a garden: it requires the constant care of watering, weeding, and fertilizing. Nurturing words and actions of affirmation, as well as compassion, giving and forgiving, are notable characteristics of good relationships. Loving words of affirmation include ongoing expressions of affection, praise, compliments, praise, encouragement, support, and appreciation. These words are enhanced by the presence of bonding rituals and activities. Successful couples have high rates of certain behaviors: quality time in shared activities; verbal and physical expressions of affection; acts of service to a partner or household; and the giving and receiving of gifts. Although successful couples experience conflicts and do engage in such negative behaviors as defensiveness and criticism, they rarely escalate to episodes of excessive anger, contempt or hostility; nor do they typically engage in abusive words or behaviors that tend to erode trust.

In coping with conflict, successful couples actively engage in repair attempts to talk

through the conflict, to actively listen to each other, to find forgiveness, and to let go of hurt feelings. At such times, they may use delaying or redirecting tactics allowing time to cool down or reflect on what they've shared during their conflict. The skill of taking a "time out" is helpful in not letting an emotionally-charged conflict get out of control.

Successful couples appear to also take the time to communicate about how they communicate (i.e., the concept of meta-communication). Since problem-talk requires a special type of communication, it is beneficial to set ground rules for the way they communicate during conflicts: this may include agreements to not yell, name call, blame, or use foul language.

Negative Behaviors

There are certain types of behaviors that not only create emotional distance between a couple, but also tend to escalate the conflict and increase the level tension between both partners: 1) ***Defensiveness***--this form of behavior can quickly shut down communication and escalate conflict, as it tends to minimize, explain away or deny the existence of a problem; 2) ***Criticism, Blaming, and Fault-finding*** not only elicits defensiveness, but also creates negative feelings in your partner, who you are wanting to understand and appreciate your concerns; 3) ***Hostility, Contempt, Put-Downs*** is a direct attack on your partner that creates hurt feelings and is destructive to a sense of love, respect, trust and caring; 4) ***Stonewalling / the Silent Treatment*** is a withdrawal and disengagement from communication, that can sometimes extend for days. While it may serve to protect a partner from upsetting problem-talk, it also is hurtful to both partners and creates a feeling of "walking on eggshells". The unspoken conflict will remain unresolved and fester, only to reappear at another time.

Conclusions

Kindness, compassion, and a spirit of generosity are key elements to nurturing your relationship. Successful couples can work on increasing the frequency of positive words and behaviors in their daily interactions, as well as, decreasing the frequency of negative behaviors that interfere with the working through of problem areas in your relationship. When you slip up with negative behaviors, it is important to have a process of apologizing and forgiving, and to be able to reaffirm your mutual caring and love.